DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 228 572 CG 016 598

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TITLE Men's and Women's Satisfying and Frustrating Experiences in Close Relationship Interactions.
PUB DATE Apr 82
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Psychological Association (63rd, San Francisco, CA, April 6-10, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; *Affective Behavior; *Behavior Patterns; Emotional Response; Interaction; *Interpersonal Relationship; *Participant Satisfaction; Personality Traits; Psychological Needs; *Sex Differences; Stress Variables
IDENTIFIERS Frustration; *Intimacy

ABSTRACT

Clinicians and family theorists have speculated that men and women differ in their orientations to close relationships, although these stereotypic patterns have not been investigated empirically. To determine whether people's interactional experiences are characterized by distinctive, sex-linked orientations to expressiveness and caring, 252 men and women in close relationships completed lengthy questionnaires, and a subsample were interviewed in depth. Data analyses provided clear support for two distinct orientations to interactions. These orientations characterized people's preferences, interpretations, and reactions to satisfying and frustrating interactions. Highly significant sex differences were found with women demonstrating a personal pattern, marked by verbal and emotional expressiveness and men displaying a pragmatic orientation, characterized by emotional and verbal reserve. Further research in interactional orientations might help couples recognize and deal with differences in partners' behavior and subjective experiences. (Author/JAC)

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ED228572

MEN'S AND WOMEN'S SATISFYING AND FRUSTRATING EXPERIENCES IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIP INTERACTIONS

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CG 016598

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Psychological Association, Sacramento, CA, April 8-11, 1982.

Abstract

Men's and Women's Satisfying and Frustrating Experiences
in Close Relationship Interactions

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Clinicians and family theorists have speculated that men and women differ in their orientations to close relationships. Women are believed to want emotional closeness and involvement with their partners. They become hurt and angry when their partners do not talk to them or listen to their feelings. Men are believed to want independence and freedom. They feel annoyed and pressured by their wives' requests for greater communication and involvement.

These stereotypic patterns have not been investigated empirically. This study's goals were: (1) to determine whether people's interactional experiences are characterized by two distinct patterns or orientations to expressiveness and caring, and (2) to examine whether these patterns are sex-linked.

The study combined lengthy questionnaires administered to 252 men and women in close relationships, with in-depth interviews of a subsample of couples. The questionnaire responses were analyzed with a variety of multivariate data analytic procedures.

Results provided clear support for two distinct orientations to interactions. These orientations characterized people's preferences,

interpretations, and reactions in satisfying and frustrating interactions. Highly significant sex differences were found in the two orientations. Women demonstrated a personal pattern, marked by emotional and verbal expressiveness and responsiveness. Men displayed a pragmatic orientation, characterized by emotional and verbal reserve.

Men's and Women's Satisfying and Frustrating Experiences in Close Relationship Interactions

Paper Presented at the 62nd Annual Meeting,
Western Psychological Association, Sacramento, California, 1982

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Clinicians and family theorists have speculated that men and women differ in their orientations to close relationships. Women are believed to want emotional closeness, mutual sharing, and involvement with their partners. In this view, women become hurt and frustrated when their partners do not talk to them or listen to their feelings. They often infer that their husbands are unfeeling and do not care about them. They may then feel rejected, lonely, unloved, and concerned about the relationship.

In contrast, men are believed to want greater independence, less active involvement with their partners, and freedom to pursue their own interests, preferably without interference from their wives. Therefore, they typically feel annoyed and pressured by their wives' requests for greater communication and involvement, and may infer that their wives are demanding and restrictive or overly emotional and dependent. Their typical reaction is to become logical and rational, to minimize the problem, or to try to avoid the situation completely.

In this stereotypic view, women are nagging and intrusive, men are unemotional and distant, and the more women approach, wanting communication,

the more men withdraw, avoiding it. To the extent these stereotypes typify men's and women's actual interactions, they are likely to cause poor communication, painful conflict, and possible relationship breakdown. Unfortunately, these patterns have not been documented empirically. Very little is known about men's and women's preferences for interaction or actual interaction experiences during their joint interactions.

This study had two goals. The first was to determine whether people's preferences and subjective experiences in interactions with their partner are characterized by two distinct patterns or orientations to expressiveness and caring: a personal pattern marked by emotional and verbal expressiveness and caring, or a pragmatic pattern marked by emotional and verbal reserve. A second goal was to examine whether these patterns are sex-linked.

The study combined lengthy questionnaires administered to 252 men and women in close relationships, with in-depth interviews of a subsample of couples. This dual strategy provided standardized measures of partners' interactional experiences as well as self-reports of couples' typical interaction patterns. Most of the items on the questionnaire were developed specifically for this study since no standardized measures of the variables of interest exist. The items were generated from empirical findings, clinical observations, and theoretical models of sex differences in close relationship interactions. The items assessed six different aspects of expressiveness and caring: self-disclosure, especially when upset; emotional expressiveness; emotional responsiveness; interest in interacting with the partner; giving emotional support; and seeking emotional support. The questions were bi-polar in format: low scoring responses were personal, or emotionally expressive, and high-scoring responses were pragmatic, or emotionally reserved.

Participants' average age was 28 years. The average length of relationship was 6.4 years, and most (61%) participants were married. The remaining participants either lived together (14%), or were dating (25%). Questionnaire responses were analyzed with a variety of multivariate data analytic procedures, including factor analysis, reliability testing, discriminant function analysis, and multiple regression.

Overall, factor analysis and reliability results provided clear support for a personal versus pragmatic orientation to interactions. These orientations characterized people's preferences, interpretations, and reactions in satisfying and frustrating interactions with their close relationship partner. Highly significant sex differences were found in the two orientations. Women were more likely than men to demonstrate a personal pattern marked by emotional and verbal expressiveness and responsiveness and by active involvement with their partner. In contrast, men were more likely than women to display a pragmatic orientation characterized by verbal reserve, emotional control, self-support, and active involvement in activities outside the relationship.

More specifically, a personal orientation was reflected in the tendency to share thoughts and feelings in the couple's conversations, especially when upset; to react emotionally to the partner, and to enjoy the couple's time together. When stressed, personally-oriented people reacted very emotionally, wanted to talk about the problem, and wanted comforting and help in dealing with the problem. Active expressiveness and responsiveness were also desired from the partner: personally-oriented people wanted their partner to share thoughts and feelings, to react emotionally, and to realize his or her effect on the person. These

preferences extended to the helping process: personally-oriented people wanted their partner to initiate helping, to ask questions, and to take time to listen and work through problems with them.

Not surprisingly, then, people who were personally-oriented were frustrated when their partner did not want to share thoughts, feelings, or worries, did not express caring or interest in them, and did not want to spend time together. These frustrations extended to the helping process. When already stressed, personally-oriented people became even more upset when their partner avoided them, did not take time to listen to their concerns, made light of the problem, or criticized them for over-reacting and being too emotional and demanding. Consequently, in arguments, personally-oriented people perceived their partner as inexpressive and unresponsive: too controlled emotionally, insensitive, uncaring, distant, overly logical and rational. Their reactions after arguing reflected these perceptions: they typically felt hurt, unloved, lonely, empty, guilty for asking too much, concerned about their partner's love, and worried about the relationship.

In marked contrast, a pragmatic orientation was characterized by emotional and verbal reserve, that is, not talking much, especially about feelings, not reacting emotionally to the partner, preferring to spend free time on individual pursuits, and handling worries on one's own.

Not surprisingly, then, pragmatically-oriented people were frustrated by their partner's expressiveness and responsiveness: by his or her talking too much about feelings and problems, continually wanting reassurance, not leaving them alone, asking too many questions, having too many reactions, or criticizing them for being over-controlled,

logical, and distant. Consequently, in arguments, the partner was perceived as overly expressive and responsive: too emotionally uncontrolled and sensitive, nagging and interfering, demanding too much caring, and too intrusive and involved. After arguing, pragmatically-oriented people's reactions reflected these perceptions: they felt restricted, confined, pestered, annoyed, smothered, intruded upon, attacked by their partner's strong emotions, and guilty for not giving enough. Although they wanted to forget the argument completely, they were confident the problem would work out and were not worried about the relationship.

These findings have several implications for further work. First, links between the personal versus pragmatic orientation and relationship satisfaction should be explored. If partners do in fact differ in their orientations, these differences may create conflict and may affect partners' overall happiness in the relationship. Second, it seems important to determine whether people's interactional orientations are reflected in their actual behavior in interactions with their partner. For example, are personally-oriented people actually more emotionally expressive and responsive to their partners? Are pragmatically-oriented people actually more reserved verbally and emotionally?

Another interesting issue concerns the matching of orientations within couples. The study's findings suggest that most women are more personal than their partners. How prevalent is this pattern? How do couples with personal men and pragmatic women differ from couples with pragmatic men and personal women? Do different combinations of personal and pragmatic people experience different relationship satisfaction consequences? Further exploration of these questions seems important for understanding

how close relationships form, as well as the sources of happiness in close relationships.

A fourth issue involves the links between interactional orientation and more general personality dimensions, such as sex-role self-concept. For example, are androgynous people less extreme and more varied in their orientations than sex-typed people? Are people with feminine sex-role self-concepts more personal than people with masculine sex-role self-concepts? How are sex-role self-concept, interactional orientation, and relationship happiness linked?

A fifth issue concerns the extent to which people's interactional orientations describe their behavioral preferences and subjective experiences in interactions with people other than their romantic partner. For example, are pragmatic people oriented to emotional and verbal reserve in all their interactions, or just in interactions involving expressiveness and caring with their romantic partner? Further research investigating these questions would be extremely useful, not only in understanding sex differences in interactional orientation, but also in helping couples recognize and deal with differences in partners/ behavior and subjective experiences.

Table

Highest Loading Items on

Interaction Experience Scales

SCALE NAME	PERSONAL RESPONSE	PRAGMATIC RESPONSE
Behavior on a Typical Evening (.67)[a]	1. Talk to my partner when I'm feeling uncertain or afraid (.65)[b] 2. React with strong emotions to what my partner says and does (.64) 3. Be emotional and expressive when I talk (.63)	1. Keep my fears and uncertainties to myself (.65) 2. Have no emotional reactions to what my partner says and does (.64) 3. Be calm and rational when I talk (.63)
Behavior after a Stress-filled Day (.71)	1. Tell my partner all about the problem (.83) 2. Talk to my partner about the problem and my feelings (.72) 3. Look for sympathy, comfort, and support from my partner (.71)	1. Say very little about the problem to my partner (.83) 2. Prefer not to talk about the problem and my feelings (.72) 3. Manage on my own without involving my partner (.71)
Preferred Partner Behavior on a Typical Evening (.77)	1. Be more active and involved in our conversations (.62) 2. Be more interested in spending time with me (.59) 3. Be more expressive and tuned into feelings in dealing with problems (.57)	1. Put less energy and attention into our conversations (.62) 2. Leave me more time to pursue my own interests and hobbies (.59) 3. Be more logical and calm in dealing with problems (.57)

continued

SCALE NAME	PERSONAL RESPONSE	PRAGMATIC RESPONSE
Preferred Partner Behavior after a Stress-filled Day (.76)	1. Help me work through the problem (.71) 2. Notice that I'm preoccupied and ask me questions to draw me out (.67) 3. Talk to me or comfort and hold me (.61)	1. Help me put the problem aside (.71) 2. Notice that I'm preoccupied and leave me alone until I'm ready to talk (.67) 3. Leave me by myself (.61)
Frustrating Partner Behavior (.76)	1. Says nothing at all about his or her feelings and reactions (.79) 2. Never wants to talk (.78) 3. Avoids talking about issues or problems in the relationship (.67)	1. Talks at length about his or her feelings and reactions (.79) 2. Always wants to talk (.78) 3. Always wants to discuss issues or problems in the relationship (.67)
Frustrating Partner Behavior after a Stress-filled Day (.87)	1. Tunes me out or gets involved in something else, rather than paying attention to my concerns (.74) 2. Has no emotional reaction to me (.65) 3. Does not try to find out what's bothering me (.62)	1. Becomes overly involved in trying to help me, rather than letting me work through the problem by myself (.74) 2. Has a strong emotional reaction to me (.65) 3. Asks a lot of questions before I'm ready to talk (.62)
Perceptions of Partner during Arguments (.78)	1. Too emotionally controlled (.70) 2. Uncaring and inconsiderate (.69) 3. Insensitive (.69)	1. Too emotionally uncontrolled (.70) 2. Demanding too much caring and consideration (.69) 3. Too sensitive (.69)
Emotional Reactions to Partner after Arguing (.67)	1. Feel lonely and disconnected (.73) 2. Feel hurt, unloved, or rejected by my partner (.73) 3. Feel empty and irritable (.61)	1. Feel smothered and intruded upon (.73) 2. Feel confined, restricted, or pressured by my partner (.73) 3. Feel pestered and annoyed (.61)

continued

SCALE NAME	PERSONAL RESPONSE	PRAGMATIC RESPONSE
Frustrating Interaction Patterns (.80)	"A" = Personal Response	"B" = Pragmatic Response
	1. "A" wants "B" to express more feelings when something goes wrong in the relationship. "A" thinks "B" is unfeeling, selfish, and uncaring about "A" and the relationship (.75).	
	2. "B" wants "A" to be more rational during arguments. "B" thinks "A" is overly emotional and makes too big a deal about things (.70).	
	3. "B" likes to handle worries and problems by him or herself, without involving "A". Therefore, "B" feels pestered and harrassed when "A" keeps asking "B" what's bothering him or her (.70).	

[a] Numbers in parentheses are the factor loadings of the scales on the overall personal/pragmatic orientation scale.

[b] Numbers in parentheses are the factor loadings of the items on the scale. Only the three highest loading items are listed in this table.

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